

A New Bridle Suite at VCC

Horses begin arriving on Monday for new equine management education program

By Rich Bauer, Managing Editor Wednesday, May 1, 2013

The Vandalia Correctional Center staff welcomed six new residents on Monday. Those new residents are unlike any others housed at any prison in Illinois.

Six retired thoroughbreds, horses that are the first to be housed at VCC through a new equine management vocational training program at the prison, arrived on Monday, and two more are coming in later this week.

The program is being operated with the Illinois Department of Corrections' partnership with the Thoroughbred Retirement Foundation and the Illinois Horsemen's Benevolent and Protective Association.



Photos by Rich Bauer Holding the first two retired thoroughbreds to come off of the trailer at Vandalia Correctional Center are Ron Kistler (left), chief engineer of maintenance at VCC, and Jessie Maske, the instructor for the new equine management education program. A grand opening for the program is scheduled for June 5.

The TRF and IHPBA approached IDOC about operating a Second Chance Ranch for retired thoroughbreds at VCC like those at prisons in eight other states, according to Kathleen Mattingly, the IDOC state vocational coordinator who works out of VCC.

Those two groups, she emphasized, are funding the program, along with donations. "The taxpayers are not paying for this in any shape or form," Mattingly said.

"This program doesn't cost anyone any money," she said.

"Everything that has been done has been through the assistance of the (VCC) administration and staff."

The two groups, she said, wanted to be involved in a vocational program that teaches offenders equine management education. At the same time, the program cares for and provides a new home for retired thoroughbreds.

“We are not a slaughterhouse,” Mattingly said. “In fact, we are just the opposite.” She said that the horses will be trained to become available for adoption through the TRF or IHBPA.

“This program will save retired horses from slaughter, while, at the same time, give us a chance to utilize the acreage here at Vandalia (Correctional Center) for training.

“We are going to utilize what the (VCC) grounds have to offer,” Mattingly said.

That includes the conversion of the former livestock barn into a home for the retired thoroughbreds.

Four stalls have been completed. The long-range plans call for 13 stalls, which will allow the facility to house up to 40 horses.

The conversion of the livestock barn and the installation of new, donated fencing for a large area east of the barn in which the horses will be allowed to roam have been done by offenders at VCC, alongside and under the supervision of the program instructor, local resident Jessie Maske.

“All of the work has been done by Jessie and the offenders,” Mattingly said. “There has not been anyone come in (from outside the prison) to do this work or assist.

“And we (IDOC) have not spent any money to do this,” she said.

“And, next week, we will be receiving medical supplies. We have been real fortunate to receive medical supplies and equipment from donors.

“All of this is done through the TRF and IHBPA and our donors. We (IDOC) do not exchange any money at all.

“That includes the salary for Jessie. She is paid by the TRF,” Mattingly said.

“We have put together a really fantastic curriculum,” Mattingly said, noting that this new IDOC program is one of the “program-centric ideals” of Assistant IDOC Director Gladys Taylor.

That curriculum was designed by Maske and Mattingly, with direction and support from Debbie Denning, chief of the IDOC program division, and consultants Marcy Morris, IDOC coordinator of volunteer services, and Diana Pikulski, an officer with the TRF.

Mattingly said that the program is getting under way with seven to 10 offenders. The IDOC goal is to have up to 15 offenders involved in the program at a time.

"As the number of retired horses that we have here increases, the student enrollment will increase.

"There will be turnover three or four times a year," Mattingly said.

"Our goal is to serve as many (offenders) as we can and get them ready for post-release," she said.

To be enrolled in the program, they have to meet a number of stringent qualifications, Maske said.

"They have to be physically-fit enough to be involved, be able to lift some weight," Maske said. "We're dealing with 1,500-pound horses, so we want a person who is also agile.

"They also have to understand that they will have to work very hard, either in the classroom or outside," she said.

The offenders also have to have an education level of at least the sixth-grade level, due to the conversions they will have to make for inoculations and other medical treatment. Maske said inmates convicted of either sex offenses or animal cruelty charges cannot be involved in the program, and they have to be inmates who have qualified for outside clearance.

"They are inmates who have proven their trustworthiness," Mattingly said. "There are some very stringent criteria that have been established for this program."

Maske said that so far, she has seen offenders being strongly committed to the program.

"They have given up lunch, and they have been willing to work out in the cold and the rain," she said.

Maske and the offenders participating in the program will have about a month to get familiar with the operations of the program before it is unveiled to others.

A grand opening of the program is scheduled for June 5, with a small group being invited by IDOC to learn about it.

Illinois is the ninth state to have a Second Chance Ranch through the TRF, and Mattingly said IDOC officials didn't decide to offer the program without observing it themselves.

She said a group visited a Second Chance facility at a prison in Indiana.

"We visited that center because we wanted to see it in action," Mattingly said.
"Particularly, we wanted to see how the inmates act and how they have reacted to the program.

"What we learned is that the offenders can tell you how they've changed from the first day of being in the program," she said.

"One inmate told us, 'I have never had anyone care for me like this,'" Mattingly said.
"And one inmate even came back to visit horses that he had helped to take care of after he was released from prison."